A looming crisis for Thailand's domesticated elephants?

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Looking closely at Thailand's domesticated Asian elephant population shows it to be mind boggling on three unusual counts. This population is distinctly at odds with all the other range state countries and is likely unique for an endangered species in the whole world. Unfortunately, a portending confluence of these three anomalies will almost inevitably bring great pain to Thailand's domesticated elephants.

1 Mind Boggler One is the simple fact is that Thailand's domesticated elephants (for complex reasons I prefer the term "domesticated"—not "domestic"—to "captive," but save that debate for another day) are internationally seen as wild elephants but in Thailand are private property. Since 1939 domesticated elephants have legally been classified as "draft animals"—along with cattle, horses, water buffalo and several other truly domesticated animals. Being a draft animal means that elephants are subject to private ownership and are legally private property pure and simple. Over 95% of Thailand's approximately 3,700 domesticated elephants are owned by private citizens and, within some modest legal strictures, they can be bought and sold, transported and displayed to the public at will. They can be made to perform and to give rides. What other wild animal legally classified internationally (including Thailand, a CITES signatory) as an endangered species is allowed to exist in such a buccaneering entrepreneurial environment? (The white rhino population in South Africa is probably the closest parallel but that comparison pales into insignificance.)

2 Mind Boggler Two is that it is as if Thailand's domesticated elephants were somehow catapulted from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first while almost totally bypassing the twentieth century. A seismic shift in economic models happened in a only a decade or so, switching from logging to international tourism. Before 1989 very few domesticated elephants were employed in tourism and most were employed as loggers in lush timber concessions, expensively bought from government, in protected natural forests. Then, in 1989 a very powerful tropical storm, Typhoon Gay, killed over 800 people, mostly by severe flooding and mudslides. The aftermath of Gay provoked a political scandal when the cause of the flooding and mudslides was proved to be severe deforestation brought about by illegal logging. The government was driven to rapidly ban all logging in protected forests. Many hundreds of elephants were thrown out of work (or would have been if not for a massive flurry of illegal logging in response to the ban). Serendipitously, though, the logging ban coincided with a steadily skyrocketing influx of foreign tourists. This explosion in tourists has been steady and dramatic: Thailand in 2019 will have over 30 million tourists and well over 100 good-sized elephant tourism camps. Virtually no elephants are employed in logging apart from a few elephants working part time at local level. (The best loggers are nearly all bulls too dangerous to work in tourism and many of them are, after attaining permission from the Thai government, contracted to log inside Myanmar along the long shared border.)

The multitude of tourists has been a mixed blessing.

PHOTO: DEVILKAE / ADOBE STOCK

By far the largest number of tourists recently have been Chinese on very low budgets, and competition for their meager dollars has led to some camps with sweatshop conditions. (By far the most common abuse facing Thai elephants is not overt cruelty but simple overwork.) Another deleterious effect of tourism has been to encourage wealthy owners to buy many elephants and to discourage small and family ownership.

About 70% of Thailand's domesticated elephants, probably about 2,500 animals, are employed in tourism, and huge sums of money are to be made. The business is, however, cutthroat at every level. Even in good times elephant owners and camp owners are already enmeshed in a dog-eat-dog fight for a share of the "tourist dollar." Tour operators squeeze camp owners. Camp owners squeeze elephant owners. Elephant owners squeeze mahouts. Elephants are all too often the last priority.

3 Mind Boggler Three is a looming, dire threat which virtually nobody—in or out of Thailand, in or out of government—is considering seriously. That threat is nonetheless inevitable with the only question being how soon it will happen and how severe it will be. It is not a viral disease, nor climate change, nor an epidemic of animal abuse—it is a severe global economic recession or, worse, a full-blown depression. A solid body of respected economists believe that recessions are cyclical and that we are overdo for one, with the year 2020 often mentioned. The likelihood of a trade war and economic conflict with China can only make things worse.

How can a recession possibly affect elephants, who have no need of money? Well, very few of Thailand's 3,700 elephants can ever be released into the wild, and thus they are completely dependent on owners for their care and sustenance. The human–elephant relationship in Thailand now is a symbiotic relationship—both in good times and bad. A severe economic recession would be disastrous for Thailand's tourism elephants.

Foreign consumers will lose jobs and no longer have surplus income for the luxury of foreign travel,

one of the first budgetary casualties in hard times. A recession will inevitably bring a drop in tourists, not only from rich Western countries but also from China and other regional neighbors. (Examining a list of tourist arrivals to Thailand by country, you have to descend to the ninth place to find a Western country, the UK.)

Thailand had a brief foretaste of such an economic calamity when ravaged by the SARS epidemic of 2002 to 2004. Although conclusive data does not exist, it can safely be said that at its peak tourist numbers had fallen to about half. The price of an elephant plummeted to half. Many elephants and mahouts lost their jobs. Turmoil reigned. Luckily, the SARS epidemic passed quickly and tourist numbers returned to their meteoric rise rapidly enough that elephant camp owners blithely saw SARS as a blip, a unique and temporary disruption. The SARS scare dissipated just as people concerned with elephant welfare were becoming aware of how serious the threat really was.

A perfect storm awaits, a confluence of the three anomalies described above. What problems will an economic crisis bring? A vast industry dependent on foreign exchange earned by an endangered species almost wholly in private hands will collapse into chaos and despair. Many elephant camps will go belly-up. Many elephant owners and many camp owners will be unable to keep their elephants once they cannot meet payrolls because mahouts will leave (most often with several months salary owed in arrears). Small traditional owners, virtually all debt-ridden and living hand-to-mouth, will be especially vulnerable. Elephants still at work will in some camps be "sweated" to work even harder. As happened during SARS, many small owners will be forced to take their elephants and wander the highways from town to town basically looking for handouts; some might even try to enter Bangkok, which has after many years finally banned elephants from entering the city. The one-third of the elephant population not working in tourism will suffer equally because they are nearly all financially dependent on the cash earned by elephants still working. Many elephant owners will want to sell but there will be very few buyers except for wealthy owners, shielded by diversified business interests, likely to jump on rock bottom prices. Further consolidation of ownership among a few big owners is likely. Malnutrition will haunt the elephants of owners with no money to buy food, and even owners in rural areas with access to free grazing will be hard-pressed to pay the mahouts needed to take elephants to that food. The cumulative effects will be catastrophic.

Thailand will have no easy answers. In most range states, elephants will suffer little because they are still grounded in traditional settings and protected by strong government security blankets. Thailand's domesticated elephants, however, are nearly 100% privately owned and nearly 100% dependent on foreigners' wallets for their upkeep. A return to logging will be impossible because while demand still exists the trees are no longer there. Government, already troubled by the economic downturn, will be overwhelmed and lack the funds, personnel, and expertise to launch forceful countermeasures. The Thai public has a big heart and will try to help, but they only rarely visit commercial elephant camps because they are tailored for foreigners and very expensive. Even if sympathetic Westerners were able to amass large sums to help, building an efficient distribution system would be next to impossible. Distribution would also be hampered because well-heeled Western donors and NGOs will refuse to give money to traditional camps (even very humanely managed ones that provide excellent care) that allow the use of hooks and chains and camps with elephants that give rides and perform shows. Western generosity will be funneled to the "politically correct camps" that shun rides and shows—understandable perhaps, but what about the poor elephants trapped elsewhere? In any case, these boutique camps catering to wealthy Westerners are already the best insulated financially so helping them would be like bailing out banks and ignoring the distressed workers. Everybody in the elephant-keeping community will be desperately looking for money but there will be precious little money to be found.

The well-being of Thailand's domesticated Asian elephants will be a direct victim of modernity, of global geopolitics and international economics—but unfortunately modernity is unlikely to bring answers.